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- Today's Insider (PDF)



YOU DON'T SAY...

"They don't want to make a 30-minute commitment"

Sen. Andy Wells, R-Catawba, on hiring millennials for state government jobs.

THE INSIDER, 12/14/17

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News Summary

Metal Detectors

North Carolina General Assembly Police Chief Martin Brock told members of the Joint Legislative Emergency Management Oversight Committee Thursday that the NCGA police department has been looking at plans and procedures for using metal detectors, but he couldn't give specifics. He also said he has submitted recommendations for metal detectors to both the Legislative Services Commission and Paul Coble, legislative services officer.

Brock's comments came after Rep. Garland Pierce, D-Scotland, asked how far away the General Assembly was from getting metal detectors. "I know it's the 'People's Building,'" Pierce said, "But is that a conversation, is that something that is being had?" Brock said those conversations are happening constantly.

"We hope to have something developing in that regard fairly soon," Brock said. "I completely agree that this is 'The People's Building' and we want everyone to have access. I fully believe the public should be able to come and watch the legislators enact legislation. However, I do think we can (install metal detectors) in a reasonable way to balance safety and security as other states have done."

However, it's unclear how metal detectors would be deployed in the Legislative Building -- or the office building -- since there are multiple points of entry. Beyond metal detectors, members are able to get duress or panic alarms installed in their offices, which works as a silent alarm that goes to the NCGA police if there's a threat. Sen. Ron Rabin, R-Harnett, wanted to know Brock's thoughts on allowing lawmakers and staff members to carry concealed firearms if they go through the necessary training. "I have a lot of concerns anytime deadly weapons, or serious weapons are being discussed. ... I also believe in enforcing the law," Brock said. "So, whatever legislation is passed I will do my best to enforce it." (Lauren Horsch, THE INSIDER, 12/15/17)

Prison Nurses

Nearly a third of nursing positions in the state prison system are currently vacant, and the N.C. Department of Public Safety is stepping up its recruiting efforts to address the problem amid a nationwide nursing shortage. Legislators requested data on the issue in this year's budget bill, and Joe Prater of the Department of Public Safety presented the information Thursday to the Joint Legislative Oversight Committee on Justice and Public Safety. Of the 910 nursing jobs in the prison system, 266 are vacant and 144 have been vacant for more than six months.

The problem is exacerbated by the recent attacks on prison guards in two North Carolina prisons. Asked by a legislator about the impact of the incidents, director of nursing Anita Myers said "we do see a dramatic impact in being able to recruit nurses to those two facilities," noting that several nurses quit and others are on leave. At Bertie Correctional Institute, eight of 13 registered nurse positions was vacant last month. "We haven't been able to recruit travel nurses to those facilities. We hope with time as we put more safety in place we'll be able to address that."

DPS is taking steps to making prison nursing jobs more appealing, Prater said, and "some based on modern day HR practices and some quite frankly are based on common sense." The agency is now making contingent job offers up to six months ahead of nurse becoming licensed. It's working with nursing schools to have registered nurse students complete their clinical residency requirements at Central Prison in Raleigh. And it's hiring four recruiters across the state to help fill openings. The agency is also working to improve orientation and training programs -- including safety training -- for new hires to ensure that they'll stick around. "This is critical to us especially today," Prater said. "Personal safety of our healthcare staff is paramount to us."

Rep. Bob Steinburg, R-Chowan, has been calling for reforms in the wake of the deadly attacks, and he suggested that more work is needed beyond nursing-specific recruitment. "I don't think that this

in and of itself is going to get to the root of the problem," Steinburg said. "There's a bigger problem that has to be resolved." The committee chairwoman, Sen. Shirley Randleman, R-Wilkes, chastised Steinburg for straying off the topic. The prison attacks were not on Thursday's committee agenda.

Rep. Allen McNeill, R-Randolph, questioned whether all prison nurses should be state employees. He said the state is liable for malpractice claims when it employs the nursing staff. "Have you thought about taking a prison here and a prison there and contracting out for private sector medical care?" McNeill said. "It's something I would like you to look into." (Colin Campbell, THE INSIDER, 12/15/17)

Cardinal Lawsuit

Former leaders of Cardinal Innovations Healthcare counter-sued North Carolina's Department of Health and Human Services on Thursday, arguing the state lacked the authority to take over Cardinal and remove its board. The lawsuit seeks to stop DHHS Secretary Mandy Cohen from hiring a replacement board. A new board was being selected Thursday in Alamance County. A spokeswoman for N.C. Attorney General Josh Stein called the filing "meritless."

Former CEO Richard Topping told the Observer that it's important the issues raised in the lawsuit be resolved. "We think it's time to have the courts weigh in and provide clarity and guidance," Topping said. The state lacks the authority to take over Cardinal's local managed entity function because Cardinal has not committed financial mismanagement, the lawsuit says. The lawsuit also alleges that the Cardinal board had advised Cohen and DHHS that it planned to pay severance to departing executives and repay the amount to the state. DHHS "reneged on the deal reached by the parties and attempted to dissolve the Cardinal Board," the lawsuit says.

Laura Brewer, a spokeswoman for the attorney general, dismissed the board's filing. "This motion is meritless," she said. "As Mr. Topping's counsel is aware, we continue to discuss important terms and continue to hope we'll be able to reach agreement on a final settlement."

Former Cardinal board member Bill Burgin said the board countersued to "protect" itself. "It's not what any of us want," he said. "I've got no reason to fight the state over any of this. I'm just a volunteer."

Sen. Tommy Tucker, R-Union, a frequent Cardinal critic, called the lawsuit "counter-productive."

"It furthers their arrogance," he said. "They still believe that they've done a good job." (Cassie Cope and Jim Morrill, THE CHARLOTTE OBSERVER, 12/14/17)

Redistricting Recommendations

The North Carolina General Assembly is not entitled to another shot at fixing any remaining racial flaws in its most recent redistricting efforts, voting rights lawyers contend in newly filed court papers. Attorneys for 31 voters who successfully sued the legislature for racial gerrymandering are urging a three-judge, federal panel to resolve the lingering flaws on its own by adopting a "special master" consultant's recent recommendations. "While courts generally are obligated to give the legislature the first chance to remedy violations in a redistricting plan, they are not required to give the legislature limitless chances to do so," lawyers Allison Riggs and Edwin Speas assert in their joint petition.

A lawyer for current and former Republican leaders of the General Assembly has urged the judges to issue a final ruling in the case by Jan. 10 so that the General Assembly could either reconvene in Raleigh to fix any agreed-upon shortcomings or appeal the panel's decision to the U.S. Supreme Court. "At a minimum, the court should issue a final order forthwith so that meaningful appellate action may be taken, or the legislature may redraw the districts, if necessary, as it stands ready to do," Raleigh lawyer Phillip Strach argued on behalf of the Republican leadership.

But if district courts had to keep giving legislators second chances to fix flawed voting maps, "the

incentive for a legislature to enact a full remedy would be nonexistent: It could keep reaping the benefits from unconstitutional actions for an entire decade by making only minimal corrections on each remedial pass," contend Speas of Raleigh and Riggs of Durham.

Strach maintained that the trio of judges has yet to clearly define what was wrong with the four districts that remain in question and that the Stanford professor's proposed changes to those districts were no better than what the General Assembly had come up with this summer. The redrawn districts differed markedly from the General Assembly's latest versions only in that each of the special master's had fewer black residents of voting age and each favored future Democrat candidates, Strach claimed. "Other than these two differences, the special master's plan boils down to a beauty contest between his districts and the challenged districts," Strach said in his written motion filed last week. In their response to Strach's criticism filed Wednesday, Riggs and Speas countered that the Special Master did no more to the legislators' recently enacted plan than was necessary to bring the four, questionable districts into compliance with voting law. (Taft Wireback, GREENSBORO NEWS & RECORD, 12/14/17)

Old Landfills

The N.C. Department of Environmental Quality is working to address environmental problems at 677 old landfills across the state that were unregulated -- many of which are close to drinking water sources. The legislature's Environmental Review Commission got an update Wednesday on the program, which is funded by a \$2-per-ton tax on municipal solid waste disposal -- generating a total of \$160 million in revenue over the past decade.

Michael Scott from the Division of Waste Management said his agency works to evaluate the risks at each unregulated landfill site to determine the best use for the tax revenue. So far, they've tested 1,000 drinking water sources to determine if there's any contamination, and 20 homeowners have been given water filtration systems. In most cases, the agency doesn't dig out landfill material but instead works to cap the old landfills to prevent toxins from spreading. DEQ recently launched a study with two engineering firms to try the landfill mitigation projects with less state oversight, which will provide data on the best approach to the program.

Legislators voiced concerns Wednesday about disclosure issues surrounding old landfill properties. In some cases, buyers of neighboring properties aren't informed about the dump sites next door. Committee members mentioned House Bill 763, a bipartisan bill sponsored by Rep. Brian Turner, D-Buncombe, and Rep. Chuck McGrady, R-Henderson, that would require DEQ to provide counties with electronic data about hazardous sites. The data would then be included in county GIS property mapping systems and disclosed in real-estate transactions. McGrady said on Twitter after the meeting that the legislation could be revisited at a future meeting. (Colin Campbell, THE INSIDER, 12/15/17)

School Funding

State lawmakers could overhaul the way \$9.4 billion in public school dollars are spent annually, affecting the way that North Carolina's 1.6 million public school students are educated. Legislators are looking at changing how the state funds K-12 education following a highly critical legislative staff report that recommended reforming or overhauling the school funding system. Adam Levinson, chief financial officer at the state Department of Public Instruction, urged lawmakers to show caution before making any major changes, but some legislators say an overhaul is needed. "Yes there are some improvements that are possible," Levinson said at Wednesday's meeting of the Joint Legislative Task Force on Education Finance Reform. "There's relatively low hanging fruit."

"While overhaul is certainly an option, restoring, recalibrating, consolidating could all be considered to achieve your goals before the significant heavy lift of an overhaul."

But Sen. Jerry Tillman, R-Randolph, said it's up to the task force to do the hard work of coming up with a new school funding system. "If you're waiting for DPI to come up with a big and bold new plan

for funding the schools, you will never see it," Tillman said. "They will do it in one of two ways: the State Board (of Education) will direct it if we direct the state board or we ourselves propose a plan. Now in this committee is the very time to do something bold."

Some Republican legislators have urged their fellow task force members not to come up with a system that shifts too much of the money to the larger urban districts. The GOP has more of its political strength in the state's rural areas and school districts compared to Democrats, who've fared better in the urban areas. Some legislators such as Tillman have urged the group to recommend changes that would increase funding for charter schools, which are taxpayer-funded schools that are exempt from some of the rules that traditional public schools must follow.

The state's current system for funding schools, with some modifications over the years, dates back to 1985. Money is provided to school districts and charter schools through 37 different categories, such as for textbooks and teachers, in what are called allotments. A November 2016 report from the General Assembly's Program Evaluation Division (PED) found multiple issues with the allotment system, including charging that it's illogical, overly complex, not transparent and favored wealthy counties. Examples of issues raised include how all charter schools receive funding for transportation but only 49 percent of schools provide the service.

The PED report recommended reforming the current model or switching to a system called weighted student funding, where schools get a certain amount of money for each student and then additional dollars for characteristics such as if the student is low-income or has a disability. The report led to the formation of the task force, which has been meeting since last month to develop recommendations on school funding. Republicans account for 16 of the 19 legislators on the task force.

Left-learning groups have been critical of how the task force will not be looking at whether the state is providing enough money for education. Rep. Craig Horn, R-Union, the task force co-chairman, has argued that the group first needs to determine whether money is being distributed properly.

On Wednesday, Levinson argued that the state already has a weighted funding model because school districts get additional money for students based on different characteristics such as if they're limited English proficient or academically gifted. He also questioned several of the findings in the PED report and praised the current funding system as being based on logic and research. "Clearly some improvement is possible," Levinson said. "But the extent of that improvement should be considered very carefully."

Legislators were skeptical of Levinson's arguments. Sen. Mike Lee, R-New Hanover, the task force co-chairman, closed Wednesday's meeting by talking about how the funding system hasn't kept up with the changing times. "I could ask you a multitude of questions that have changed dramatically in the last 10-15 years," Lee said. "Yet the way we fund education is based upon a system that was in place when my mom was in school and probably when her mom was in school." (T. Keung Hui, THE NEWS & OBSERVER, 12/14/17)

Rescue Funding

The N.C. Search and Rescue Program urged lawmakers Thursday to provide state funding to its efforts to coordinate disaster response efforts across the state. Overseen by N.C. Emergency Management, the program uses mutual aid agreements between local first responders to ensure that specialized resources, such as swift water rescue teams and helicopters, can be available wherever they're needed.

Wilmington Fire Chief Buddy Martinette, who helps lead the program, said it has become a national model for other states, and it has resulted in big improvements in emergency response efforts from Hurricane Floyd in 1999 to Hurricane Matthew last year. But the federal funding that helped launch the program has been drying up. "The current grant amounts cannot adequately sustain the program," Martinette told a legislative oversight committee.

In recent budget cycles, the program hasn't succeeded in getting a \$2.4 million state allocation toward its \$4.8 million overall budget. This year, appropriations bills with that amount were filed by seven Republican sponsors in the House and Senate, but the money didn't make the final budget. The money would go toward training and equipment maintenance. (Colin Campbell, THE INSIDER, 12/15/17)

Teaching Fellows

The NAACP has raised concerns about the lack of historically black universities chosen for the state's new teaching fellows program, saying it creates a "discriminatory effect that is unacceptable in a state with such a problematic history of educational disparity and segregation." NAACP President Rev. Dr. T. Anthony Spearman, in a statement Wednesday, echoed concerns of some lawmakers who have questioned why historically black universities weren't represented among the five schools chosen for the new program, which provides scholarships for budding teachers in science, math and special education. The five schools selected by the N.C. Teaching Fellows Commission are majority white campuses -- Elon University, Meredith College, N.C. State University, UNC-Chapel Hill and UNC-Charlotte. But only one historically black institution -- N.C. A&T State University in Greensboro -- was among the 16 universities that applied to be included in the teaching fellows program, according to a list of applicants. Sixteen universities applied: Appalachian State, Campbell, Catawba College, East Carolina, Elon, Gardner-Webb, Meredith College, N.C. A&T, N.C. State, Queens, UNC-Chapel Hill, UNC-Charlotte, UNC-Greensboro, UNC Pembroke, UNC Wilmington and Western Carolina University.

Fayetteville State University's education dean, Marion Gillis-Olion, said in an email her college did not apply for the program "because we did not have evidence that we currently meet the standards in the request for proposals." A 14-member commission scored the applications in November, and the winners were announced shortly thereafter. The commission was made up of education school deans, teachers, principals, a business community member and a local school board member. (Jane Stancill, THE NEWS & OBSERVER, 12/14/17)

Weekend TV

Political roundtable shows in North Carolina will remember 2017 in politics -- in North Carolina and across the nation, the challenges facing North Carolina's aging population, who should be paying for Duke Energy's coal ash clean-up, and how former Democratic Gov. Jim Hunt impacted the state's education system. Here's what to look for:

- **Education Matters:** This week host **Keith Poston** has a one-on-one conversation with original "education governor," four-term Gov. James B. Hunt, Jr. They'll discuss how Hunt made education a priority for the state and what he sees as the challenges and opportunities to bring people together on behalf of NC's children. **Airs:** Saturdays at 7:30 p.m. on WRAL, Sunday at 8:00 a.m. on Fox50, Sunday at 6:30 a.m. and Wednesday at 9:30 a.m. on UNC-TV's North Carolina Channel and anytime on NCForum.org.
- **Front Row:** This week's show is a year in review of the General Assembly, President Trump's first year in office, and the U.S. Congress. Guests will also choose the winners and losers of 2017. **Host:** Marc Rotterman **Guests:** Mitch Kokai of the John Locke Foundation; Rep. Grier Martin, D-Wake; Jonah Kaplan, senior political reporter for ABC 11 News; and Donna King, managing editor of The North State Journal. **Airs:** 8:30 p.m. Friday on UNC-TV, and on the NC Channel at 9 p.m. Friday, 4 p.m. Saturday and 9:30 a.m. Sunday, or [online](#).
- **In Focus:** This week's show will take a look at the challenges an aging population will bring for the state, including transportation and healthcare. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that by 2035, 79.2 million people will be 65 or older; 2.5 million will be in North Carolina. **Host:** Loretta Boniti **Guests:** Sen. Gladys Robinson, D-Guilford; Rep. Carla Cunningham, D-Mecklenburg; Charmaine Fuller Cooper, lobbyist for AARP NC; Paul Durso, founder of Durso Capital Management; and Dr. Rebecca Tippett, director of Carolina Demography, UNC

Population Center. **Airs:** 11:30 a.m. and 8:30 p.m. Sunday on Spectrum News/News 14, and can be found [online](#).

- **NC Spin:** Panelists this week check the status of the Atlantic Coast Pipeline, discuss who should pay for Duke Energy's Coal Ash clean-up costs, and explore what the results in the Alabama special election mean for North Carolina. **Host:** Tom Campbell **Guests:** Dennis Wicker, former Democratic lieutenant governor; Rick Henderson, executive editor of Carolina Journal; Chris Fitzsimon, director of the Newsroom; and author John Hood. **Airs:** Sundays at 6:30 a.m. and 8:30 a.m. on Fox50 WRAZ. Shows can also be found online at [NC Spin](#).

(THE INSIDER, 12/15/17)

EPA Nominee

President Donald Trump's pick to lead a key Environmental Protection Agency department has withdrawn his nomination -- weeks after North Carolina Sens. Richard Burr and Thom Tillis announced that they would not support him. Michael Dourson, Trump's nominee to lead the Office of Chemical Safety and Pollution Prevention, withdrew Wednesday, according to The Washington Post and The New York Times. Tillis said last month that he could not support Dourson -- who had close ties to the chemical industry -- because of his concerns about N.C. water contamination issues at Camp Lejeune and near Wilmington. "We are not quite comfortable with his responses and posture on a few things," Tillis said.

Said Burr in a statement: "With his record and our state's history of contamination at Camp Lejeune as well as the current GenX water issues in Wilmington, I am not confident he is the best choice for our country."

At Camp Lejeune, nearly 750,000 people were exposed to contaminated drinking water, which led to a host of illnesses and cancers. In Wilmington, officials are trying to solve the GenX problem, which state officials believe has been caused by the release of chemical manufacturing byproducts into the Cape Fear River.

Republicans currently hold 52 seats in the Senate, a number that will fall to 51 when Doug Jones is seated from Alabama. Without the support of Tillis and Burr, Dourson faced a tough confirmation fight, especially with Susan Collins, R-Maine, signaling that she might not support Dourson either. (Brian Murphy, McClatchy DC, 12/13/17)

Wake Embezzlement

The last of four people indicted on charges of embezzling money from the Wake County Register of Deeds office surrendered to authorities Thursday morning. Veronica Scisco Gearon, 52, who lives in Raleigh, is charged with six counts of embezzling funds entrusted to a government agency. Gearon was freed from custody Thursday morning after posting \$50,000 bail. A grand jury this week accused Gearon of taking \$80,950 from 2011 to 2016. Former Register of Deeds Laura Riddick is accused of pocketing \$926,615 from the office she presided over for two decades. The indictments of Gearon, Riddick, Troy Ellis and Murray M. Parker allege that they took more than \$1.13 million combined over the past six years. Riddick stepped down earlier this year as the State Bureau of Investigation began trying to find out what happened to \$2.3 million missing from the register's office. Investigators haven't been able to account for what happened to nearly \$1.2 million of the missing money. Gearon was fired from the register's office this month.

The register's office takes in about \$14 million a year in fees for handling a variety of records, including marriage certificates -- much of it in cash. Records for Gearon's accounts showed more than \$51,000 in cash was deposited between April 1, 2013, and Jan. 31, 2017. Special Agent T.H. Forsythe wrote that Gearon told investigators she obtained the cash from a friend, her mother and her son. (Ron Gallagher and Anne Blythe, THE NEWS & OBSERVER, 12/14/17)

Embezzlement Cash

Wake County government should check its mailboxes for some money from the North Carolina Republican Party. The NCGOP says Laura Riddick, the former Wake County register of deeds, donated \$383 to its organization over the last 14 years. On Thursday, the day after Riddick was charged with six counts of embezzlement, executive director Dallas Woodhouse announced in a tweet that the state Republican Party plans to send a check for that amount to Wake County. He added that the state party hadn't donated to Riddick's campaigns over the years. Riddick, a Republican, is one of four people charged with embezzling money from the deeds office in downtown Raleigh. About \$2.3 million has gone missing over a nine-year period, and indictments allege she took \$926,615 between August 2010 and January 2017. Riddick turned herself in to authorities on Wednesday.

Woodhouse's tweet about giving away the money didn't go over well with Wake commissioner John Burns, a Democrat. "We'd prefer that the State @GOP focus less on stunts and more on adequately funding public education and behavioral healthcare throughout the state, including here in Wake County," Burns tweeted back at Woodhouse. Woodhouse responded: "Mr. Burns, I would prefer you do lots different, but this is about possibly returning tainted money to the taxpayers. Not you. Not the Commissioners. the taxpayers, but of course your record is one of little regard to taxpayers."

The Wake County Republican Party, meanwhile, is considering doing something similar, said Charles Hellwig, chairman of the party. "We definitely don't want dirty money," Hellwig said. The party is looking into how much money it received from Riddick and will likely make a formal decision when its board members meet in January, he said. (Paul A. Specht, THE NEWS & OBSERVER, 12/14/17)

Wrongful-Death Suit

The Forsyth County Board of Commissioners approved on Thursday paying \$180,000 to settle a lawsuit alleging that an inmate died in 2013 as a result of neglect from jail officials. But civil litigation against Correct Care Solutions, which provides medical care at the jail, is still moving forward. Commissioners voted for a resolution approving the settlement in which the county does not admit wrongdoing or liability. The settlement stems from a lawsuit that Diane Emmert Nixon filed July 31, 2015, in Forsyth Superior Court on behalf of the estate of her husband, Dino Vann Nixon, who died Aug. 5, 2013. The lawsuit named a number of defendants, including Correct Care Solutions, Forsyth County, Sheriff Bill Schatzman, Robert Slater, the jail's bureau commander and others. Nixon's lawsuit is one of two against Forsyth County and Correct Care that arose out of a jail death. The second involves the death of Jennifer Eileen McCormack Schuler, who died Sept. 18, 2014, at Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center. The lawsuit, which is pending, alleges that Schuler, an inmate at the jail for 17 days, was neglected by Correct Care Solutions personnel and other defendants. (Michael Hewlett, WINSTON-SALEM JOURNAL, 12/14/17)

Vidant Transition

With about a year left before its official debut, the transition process from two independent medical practices to one unified group continues between Vidant Health and ECU Physicians. The VECU Medical Group -- the name being used for the combined Vidant and ECU physician practices -- met Wednesday for its monthly meeting, chaired by Dr. Mark Stacy, dean of the Brody School of Medicine at ECU. The board was formed after the two institutions signed an integration agreement on July 26, to take effect Dec. 31, 2018.

Teams have been formed and are working on branding strategy, closing options, financial operations, human resources issues and operational planning, including management structure and clinical operations, Jacob Parrish, Vidant Health vice president for systems and procedures, told the board members. Other activities being addressed include facility inventory information systems' transition and research, Parrish said.

VECU has approved hiring three consultant firms to help with the transitions of non-physician staff compensation, employee benefits and retirement plans. The total cost is \$200,000 plus travel expenses. Another consultant is being scrutinized to help create a culture strategy for the new

medical practice entity, Parrish said. (Michael Abramowitz, THE (Greenville) DAILY REFLECTOR, 12/14/17)

Wrongly Convicted

A federal judge said Thursday that he will approve a \$1 million payout from a North Carolina town to two half-brothers wrongfully imprisoned for 30 years, but the men's attorneys must justify their cut of the proceeds before the court finalizes the settlement. U.S. District Judge Terrence Boyle's unexpected decision to allow the settlement to proceed came amid a protracted battle over whether Henry McCollum and Leon Brown's current attorneys were taking financial advantage of them. Each man will receive \$500,000 from the town of Red Springs under the deal, and any fees for the legal team representing the men must be approved by Boyle. The settlement won't end the lawsuit against a county sheriff and state agents who aren't part of the deal. The half-brothers, imprisoned following the 1983 killing of an 11-year-old girl, were released in 2014 because of DNA evidence that pointed to another man. They were later pardoned. Both have low IQs, and their original attorneys said they were scared teens berated by investigators before they signed fabricated confessions.

Boyle had rejected the settlement in May because of concerns about McCollum's ability to understand his contract with his new lawyers -- who aren't the ones who helped free him and Brown from prison in 2014. Boyle ruled in October that McCollum wasn't mentally competent to sign the representation agreement, and the judge has also appointed an advocate known as a guardian ad litem to watch out for McCollum's interests. (Jonathan Drew, THE ASSOCIATED PRESS, 12/14/17)

Court Protest

More than a dozen protesters attended a rally at the Pitt County Courthouse Thursday with the stated goal of keeping politics out of the courts. Protesters called the rally "Silent Voices, Silent Justice" in reference to how proposed changes made by legislators may affect them. Organizations Fair Court NC, Democracy NC and Progress NC were all on hand to protest a number of proposals in the state legislature. Those include a state senate bill that would require both superior and district court judges to run for re-election after two years of service. Currently, district court judges are elected every four years and superior court judges are elected every eight years.

Protesters also referred to a proposal that would eliminate the election of judges in favor of an appointment system. Progress NC executive director Gerrick Brenner said he wants people to know their court system is at risk. "People will feel the effects when they go to court, and they look at the judge, and they are going to wonder is this somebody who really going to look at my issue fairly and independently or through a political lens?" said Brenner. Protesters said it represents how a change to the judiciary system covers their voices. (Tamara Scott, WNCT NEWS, 12/14/17)

Hospital Head

Duke University Health System said Thursday that Thomas Owens will become president of Duke University Hospital next month. Owens' selection was announced just three days after announcing that 32-year Duke veteran Kevin Sowers was stepping down as the hospital's leader. Sowers will become the next president of the Johns Hopkins Health System and executive vice president of Johns Hopkins Medicine in Baltimore, Md. Owens, 49, said his focus will be continuing Duke's ongoing transition to a health care system that is more effective and affordable. He said the Triangle is a strong market where patients have choices and hospitals must be responsive and adaptable. Owens has been chief medical officer for the Duke University Health System since 2012. Before that appointment, Owens was chief medical officer for the 957-bed Duke University Hospital and chief of the Duke University Health System Hospital Medicine program. He was named as the health system's senior vice president in June of 2017, a title he will retain. Owens got his start at Duke in 1999 in internships and residency training in internal medicine and pediatrics. (John Murawski, THE NEWS & OBSERVER, 12/14/17)

Wilmington Odor

When the cat urine smell becomes too strong, Nick Zachetti simply sprays Febreze on his pillow and nearly smothers himself. Like many in the side-by-side Carolina Heights and Ardmore neighborhoods, Zachetti is familiar with the smell. He and his neighbor, Pamela Waite, were among more than a dozen residents who alerted N.C. Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) officials to a particularly strong smell during the weekend of Nov. 25.

Brad Newland is the Wilmington regional office's supervisor for the N.C. Division of Air Quality. Responding to residents, Newland wrote that it is difficult to point to what facility or mixture of facilities caused the odor and also said cold fronts during the period likely trapped odors near the surface. "I know that the catty odors have impacted downtown from time to time, and in my personal experience, the odor seems to vary. Sometimes it smells like pure cat urine to me, and sometimes it smells similar but different," Newland said.

As part of its investigation, DEQ officials locked in on a line of industries sitting on a north-northwestern line from the Carolina Heights area. That line crosses Invista, Wilbara, the New Hanover County landfill, the Kinder Morgan terminal on North Sixth Street and, perhaps most curiously, Fortron. DEQ investigators detected odors at each of the facilities during its investigation during the week of Nov. 27. They also learned that Kinder Morgan had spilled -- and reported -- 1,200 to 1,300 gallons of urea ammonium nitrate on Nov. 22, cleaning it up into the following week. Still, much of Newland's investigation and note to local officials and concerned residents focused on the Fortron facility on U.S. 421 North. In the past, that plant has drawn attention from regulators in connection with a cat odor smell.

According to company records provided to DEQ, the company has made 18 upgrades to its facility -- totaling more than \$1.5 million -- in an effort to mitigate the odors. In 2018, the company told regulators, it plans to install sampling capability in a stack in an effort to identify the source of odors and increase a polymer dryer vent capacity -- projects that will cost about \$200,000.

No matter where the smell is coming from, Newland and DEQ officials ask that residents call the local DEQ office and report any unusual odors as soon as they detect something amiss. "If you're experiencing odors," Newland said, "we need to be notified in a timely manner because it's difficult to go back in time and ascertain how bad it was and what the cause may have been." (Adam Wagner, WILMINGTON STAR-NEWS, 12/14/17)

Moore Honored

The North Carolina Sheriff's Association has recognized Speaker of the House Tim Moore of Kings Mountain as the 2017 Defender of Public Safety for the work he did during the 2017 legislative session. Moore dedicated time and effort during the session to advocate for law enforcement issues important to the association which impacts the office of sheriff, local communities and the state. "Speaker Moore took a leadership role in advancing the legislative priorities of the North Carolina Sheriff's Association which represents all 100 sheriffs in the state," said Sheriff Carson H. Smith Jr., president of the association. "As a result, our sheriffs are better equipped to protect the lives, liberties and property of North Carolina's citizens." (THE SHELBY STAR, 12/14/17)

Hired

The board of directors for the Southern Coalition for Social Justice has hired Kareem Crayton to serve as the interim executive director as the organization conducts a search for a full-time director. Anita Earls, the organization's current executive director and founder, is stepping down from her position at the end of the year to run for a seat on the Supreme Court of North Carolina. Crayton will start on Jan. 1.

A news release from the group says Crayton "is the only academic in the United States in law and political science whose primary work explores the relationship between race and politics in representative institutions." A native of Montgomery, Ala., Crayton is a magna cum laude graduate of Harvard College and holds a Ph.D. in Political Science as well as a law degree from Stanford

University. Aside from managing a consulting firm, Crayton has most recently served on the faculty of Vanderbilt University Law School. (NEWS RELEASE, 12/13/17)

Snyder's-Lance Sale

Charlotte-based snack maker Snyder's-Lance is considering selling itself, CNBC reported Thursday. The publicly traded company has hired an investment bank to consider a sale after a takeover approach from Campbell Soup, CNBC first reported, citing sources familiar with the matter. News of the reported sale sent the company's shares up nearly 13 percent to \$44.43. CNBC's sources cautioned, however, that there may be no deal. The sources also said that talks with Campbell and at least one other potential suitor are ongoing. In an email to the Observer, a Snyder's-Lance spokesman said the company does not comment on market speculation or rumors. A potential sale comes amid a year of change at Snyder's-Lance, which is the product of the 2010 merger of Pennsylvania-based Snyder's of Hanover and Charlotte-based Lance. (Katherine Peralta, THE CHARLOTTE OBSERVER, 12/14/17)

Silent Sam

A group from the UNC-Chapel Hill School of Social Work became the latest on campus calling for the removal of the Confederate monument known as "Silent Sam." They released their statement on Silent Sam and called for the removal of the statue Dec. 8. "Whatever else the memorial may symbolize to some, it was erected to glorify White people in the South, and, by extension, to carry on the subjugation of Black people. Its presence continues to legitimize and incite violence, dehumanization, and oppression. Such racist symbolism is antithetical to the ethos of this vibrant, public university. It violates our personal, professional, and communal commitments to social justice. It denigrates and misappropriates the immeasurable contributions of people of color throughout our history. It divides us. It demeans us all," the statement said. The statement was signed by about 200 faculty, staff, students and graduates from the School of Social Work.

Previous statements urging Silent Sam's removal have come from the Department of Anthropology, the Department of Geography, the Department of Communication, a group of faculty and staff from the School of Education, a group of faculty at the School of Law, the Faculty Council, UNC students and Chapel Hill Mayor Pam Hemminger. Former Chancellor James Moeser also has called for "Sam" to be gone. Attorney Hampton Dellinger, representing the UNC Black Law Students Association and other UNC students, sent a September letter to Chancellor Carol Folt and UNC system President Margaret Spellings advising them that he is prepared to file a federal lawsuit if the statue is not removed. (Joe Johnson, THE DURHAM HERALD-SUN, 12/13/17)

Honored

GrowingChange's Noran Sanford was honored as the 2017 Rural Leader of the Year at this year's Rural Assembly, held in Raleigh on Nov. 16. The Rural Leader of the Year award recognizes an alumnus of the Rural Center's flagship leadership development program, the Rural Economic Development Institute (REDI).

Sanford is the founder and executive director of GrowingChange, a youth-empowered nonprofit that is "flipping" an abandoned prison in Scotland County, transforming the site into a working farm that helps divert young people from prison, provide employment to returning veterans, and improve the wellness of the community. Sanford plans to give the open-sourced model of GrowingChange away to other communities in North Carolina to help reclaim the state's nearly 25 closed prisons. (NEWS RELEASE, 12/14/17)

WRAL Departure

WRAL anchor and reporter Gina Benitez confirms that she plans to leave the station in early March 2018. Benitez, who started at WRAL in January, said in an email that she is leaving to pursue other opportunities and hopes to announce future plans soon. Benitez and WRAL news director Rick Gall both affirm that Benitez is leaving the station under positive terms. Her primary job has been

anchoring the weekend morning news with Bryan Mims.

Other recent WRAL departures include longtime anchor Lynda Loveland, who left WRAL in early December, after announcing in September that she was taking a job with Farm Bureau. Lead anchor David Crabtree also announced in September that he is retiring in November 2018. Anchor Bill Leslie announced in October that he will retire in June 2018. Last week, WRAL announced the hiring of Jeff Hogan, an anchor from Columbus, Ohio, who will eventually take over Leslie's spot. Hogan begins his time at WRAL in January. (Brooke Cain, THE NEWS & OBSERVER, 12/14/17)

Tool Plant

Power tool-maker Stanley Black & Decker said Thursday that it's opening a new manufacturing plant in Fort Mill, S.C., where it expects to employ 500 workers. The company will invest \$31 million in the facility at the Lakemont Business Park. Stanley Black & Decker plans to manufacture and assemble cordless Dewalt hand tools in the 345,000 square-foot facility. South Carolina is providing tax credits for the company, though the state did not release the total amount of those credits. "We are proud to continuously make more product in the USA," Stanley Black & Decker global tools and storage president Jeff Ansell said, in a statement. The company operates 30 manufacturing plants in the U.S. The new York County facility is expected to open in August. (Ely Portillo, THE CHARLOTTE OBSERVER, 12/14/17)

Buncombe Purchases

Former Buncombe County Manager Wanda Greene may have directed assistants to buy nearly \$42,000 worth of gift cards, a practice that isn't common for similar municipalities across the state. Officials from four North Carolina counties contacted by the Citizen-Times reported that on average, their annual gift card expenditures were well below that of Buncombe and most commonly were distributed under employee incentive programs.

Representatives from Mecklenburg and Forsyth counties said they do not buy any gift cards, and at least one county, Wake, has an extensive policy that manages such purchases. The city of Asheville reported less than \$5,000 in gift card purchases over the past three years.

Court documents show Greene is accused of using taxpayer dollars for "inappropriate financial transactions," among them nearly \$42,000 worth of gift cards to Target, Sam's Club and Office Depot. "The disposition of these gift cards is not known," said investigators, who added there is probable cause to believe she committed federal program fraud, mail fraud and wire fraud. The total amount of Buncombe's gift card expenditures is unclear. County officials won't disclose any records, denying multiple requests by the Citizen-Times. (Jennifer Bowman, ASHEVILLE CITIZEN-TIMES, 12/14/17)

Wilmington Bypass

Though a private ribbon-cutting ceremony will take place Friday for the new section of the Interstate 140 in Brunswick County, the highway -- also known as the U.S. 17 Wilmington Bypass -- won't open to traffic. An official opening date for the bypass has not been set, though the N.C. Department of Transportation (DOT) expects it to open later this month. Even when the bypass officially opens to traffic, work will likely continue on the project into mid-2018, said Karen Collette, the DOT division engineer for Southeastern North Carolina. "Some of that work will require lane closures," she said. "But they are diligently working now to get it open to the public," Collette said the contractor working on the bypass is ahead of schedule and has until the spring to complete the project. (Makenzie Holland, WILMINGTON STAR-NEWS, 12/14/17)

Salisbury Station

Historic Salisbury Foundation announced it has reached an agreement with Venue Services to manage the event center aspects of the 1908 Salisbury Station, also known as the Salisbury Depot. The agreement took effect Dec. 1. Along with new management, the event center will be renamed

and rebranded as the "Historic Salisbury Station." Venue Services, a Rowan County firm, brings with it a state of the art marketing and management expertise in the event rental business, HSF said in a press release. "We are delighted with our agreement with Venue Services as it will allow the foundation to focus on its core mission without the distractions of managing outside events," HSF Executive Director Karen Hobson said. "We recognize the importance of the Historic Salisbury Station in the community as a valuable historic landmark as well as a popular location for special events." (THE SALISBURY POST, 12/14/17)

Campus Smoking

Pitt Community College will be a smoke-free campus starting August 2018, The Board of Trustees decided Tuesday. The board voted 12-1 with one abstention to adopt the new policy, which will ban cigarettes, e-cigarettes and other smoking products from all campus buildings, facilities or property "owned, leased or operated by Pitt Community College." Smoking in vehicles owned by the college also is prohibited. Currently, Pitt is among the 14 North Carolina Community College campuses that has a partial smoke-free policy, restricting smoking to designated outdoor areas. Among the other community colleges, 42 have tobacco-free campuses, Forsyth Technical Community College is currently the only school with a smoke-free campus and Robeson Community College is the only school with no smoking regulations. (Ginger Livingston, THE (Greenville) DAILY REFLECTOR, 12/14/17)

Parkway Reopening

The Blue Ridge Parkway has reopened in the Asheville corridor, one week after a snowstorm closed it down in North Carolina. The Asheville Citizen-Times reports the National Park Service says the parkway is now open from milepost 375 at Bull Gap to Milepost 384. The Blue Ridge Parkway Visitor Center and the Folk Art Center in Asheville are also open. However, the parkway from Asheville south to the terminus at Milepost 469 in Cherokee and north to the Virginia line is closed to vehicles. Mount Mitchell State Park and N.C. 128 are also closed. When the parkway is closed due to snow and ice, visitors can still access the parkway by foot or bicycle. However, they must park their cars away from the gates to allow passage of emergency vehicles. (THE ASSOCIATED PRESS, 12/14/17)

Theatre Purchase

A local investment group has purchased the Taylor Theatre in Edenton, breathing new life into the movie house that closed this summer. Charlie Creighton, who along with Samuel Dixon and Larry Sellers spearheaded the investment group, said the ink is dry on its deal to purchase the theater building from Montanaro Family NC Properties. The investment group raised \$610,000 for the project -- \$330,000 to buy the theater building and \$280,000 to make repairs. The theater closed in June after a storm damaged the building. A local couple -- Belinda and Ryan Respass -- will lease the theater from the investment group as its new operators. The Respases are former long-time employees of the Taylor Theatre. As contractors were busy cleaning and repairing the theater late last week, Belinda Respass said she hopes to be showing movies at the renovated Taylor early next year. (Miles Layton, THE CHOWAN HERALD, 12/14/17)

Elon Settlement

The town of Elon will pay \$12,000 to settle a lawsuit filed against it by a former police officer who said she was terminated because of a disability. The settlement with Cynthia Ring marks the end to a lawsuit she filed in 2016. The Board of Aldermen approved the settlement Tuesday, Dec. 12. The town released the documents detailing the settlement Wednesday, Dec. 13. The town says the settlement does not represent an admission that it violated any law or statute. "The town unequivocally denies that it discriminated against Ms. Ring on any basis, including any alleged disability," the settlement reads. Ring claimed that she was in a car accident in March 2015 in Florida and was left with limited mobility. Ring claimed that her doctor told her she could go back to work on "light duty," but that Assistant Police Chief James Perry told her he did not know of any such duties she could perform and would not accept her medical notes. (Bill Cresenzo, THE (Burlington) TIMES-NEWS, 12/14/17)

Wind Gust

The State Climate Office of North Carolina and Appalachian Atmospheric Interdisciplinary Research recorded a top wind gust of 98.7 mph on Dec. 12 during the 11 p.m. hour at Grandfather Mountain. Baker Perry, associate professor of geography at Appalachian State University who helps monitor the equipment, confirmed the 98.7 mph wind recorded in the 11 a.m. hour as a legitimate reading through the Grandfather Mountain staff. Perry said the reading is the second-highest recorded so far in 2017 at Grandfather Mountain, falling short of the 2017 high of 101 mph on April 6. One of the most-visited attractions in the High Country, Perry says that Grandfather Mountain is one of the most prone locations in the region to high winds for a variety of reasons. "Grandfather is susceptible to such extreme winds due to its high elevation and pronounced topographic relief, orientation roughly perpendicular to high winds out of the northwest, and location along the Blue Ridge escarpment that is a favored location for mountain wave formation in post-frontal conditions during northwest flow," Perry explained. (Thomas Sherrill, THE WATAUGA DEMOCRAT, 12/14/17)

Legislative Studies and Meetings

Items in **RED** are new listings.

LB: Legislative Building

LOB: Legislative Office Building.

More Information: <http://ncleg.net/LegislativeCalendar/>

Thursday, Dec. 14

- 9 a.m. | The Joint Legislative Oversight Committee on Information Technology, 423 LOB.
- 9 a.m. | The Joint Legislative Emergency Management Oversight Committee, 643 LOB.
- 10:30 a.m. | The Joint Legislative Oversight Committee on Justice and Public Safety, Subcommittee on ABC Permitting & Enforcement, 414 LOB.

Friday, Dec. 15

- 10 a.m. | Joint Legislative Elections Oversight Committee Meeting, 643 LOB.

Monday, Jan. 8

- 1 p.m. | House Select Committee on Strategic Transportation Planning and Long Term Funding Solutions, 544 LOB.

Tuesday, Jan. 9

- **10 a.m. | Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee, 643 LOB.**
- 1 p.m. | NOTE: DATE CHANGE - The Joint Legislative Commission on Energy Policy, 544 LOB.

Wednesday, Jan. 10

- 12 p.m. | House Session, House Chamber.
- 12 p.m. | Senate Session, Senate Chamber.

Thursday Jan. 11

- 9 a.m. | The Joint Legislative Transportation Oversight Committee, 643 LOB.

Wednesday, Jan. 17

- 10 a.m. | Child Fatality Task Force Meeting, 1027/1128 LB.

- **1 p.m. | Environmental Review Commission, 643 LOB.**

Wednesday, Jan. 24

- 10 a.m. | Child Fatality Task Force Meeting, 1027/1128 LB.

Tuesday, Feb. 6

- 10 a.m. | Child Fatality Task Force Meeting, 1027/1128 LB.

Tuesday, Feb. 13

- 10 a.m. | Child Fatality Task Force Meeting, 1027/1128 LB.

N.C. Government Meetings and Hearings

Items in **RED** are new listings.

Thursday, Dec. 14

- 9 a.m. | The Board of Directors of the North Carolina State Ports Authority meets, Board Room of the North Carolina Maritime Building, 2202 Burnett Blvd., Wilmington.
- 10 a.m. | The N.C. Rules Review Commission meets, Administrative Hearings office, Rules Review Commission Room, 1711 New Hope Church Road, Raleigh.

Monday, Dec. 18

- **3 p.m. | Economic Investment Committee meets, N.C. Commerce Executive Board Room, 301 N. Wilmington St., Raleigh.**

Tuesday, Dec. 19

- 1:30 p.m. | The N.C. Board of Agriculture will hold a meeting via a conference call.

Wednesday, Dec. 20

- 1 p.m. | The N.C. Plant Conservation Scientific Committee meets, N.C. Botanical Garden, Old Mason Farm Road, Chapel Hill.
- 6 p.m. | The N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries hold public hearing on proposed shellfish leases in Carteret County, N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries' Central District Office, 5285 Highway 70 West, Morehead City.

Thursday, Dec. 21

- 10 a.m. | The state Industrial Commission holds public hearing on proposed rule changes, Room 240, 2nd Floor, Department of Insurance's Albemarle Building, 325 North Salisbury St., Raleigh.

Thursday, Jan. 4

- 6 p.m. | The N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries hold a public hearing on proposed shellfish leases in New Hanover County, N.C. Department of Environmental Quality Regional Office, 127 Cardinal Drive Extension, Wilmington.

Tuesday, Jan. 9

- 6 p.m. | The N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries will hold a public hearing on proposed shellfish leases in Onslow County, North Topsail Beach Town Center, 2008 Loggerhead Court, North Topsail Beach.
- 7 p.m. | The N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission holds public hearing on proposed rule changes, Bladen Community College Auditorium, 7418 NC HWY 41W, Dublin.

Wednesday, Jan. 10

- 9 a.m. | Environmental Management Commission meets, Ground Floor Hearing Room, Archdale Building, 512 N. Salisbury St., Raleigh.
- 7 p.m. | The N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission holds public hearing on proposed rule changes, Old Alamance County Courthouse, 1 SE Court Square, Graham.

Thursday, Jan. 11

- 9 a.m. | Environmental Management Commission meets, Ground Floor Hearing Room, Archdale Building, 512 N. Salisbury St., Raleigh.
- 7 p.m. | The N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission holds public hearing on proposed rule changes, Stanly County Agri-Civic Center, 26032 Newt Road, Albemarle.

Tuesday, Jan. 16

- 7 p.m. | The N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission holds public hearing on proposed rule changes, Haywood Community College , 185 Freelander Drive, Clyde.

Wednesday, Jan. 17

- 7 p.m. | The N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission holds public hearing on proposed rule changes, Western Piedmont Community College, Moore Hall Leviton Auditorium, 1001 Burkemont Ave., Morganton.

Thursday, Jan. 18

- 7 p.m. | The N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission holds public hearing on proposed rule changes, Elkin High School, 334 Elk Spur Street, Elkin.

Tuesday, Jan. 23

- 7 p.m. | The N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission holds public hearing on proposed rule changes, John A. Holmes High School Auditorium, 600 Woodard St., Edenton.

Wednesday, Jan. 24

- 7 p.m. | The N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission holds public hearing on proposed rule changes, Craven Community College, 800 College Court, New Bern.

Thursday, Jan. 25

- 7 p.m. | The N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission holds public hearing on proposed rule changes, Nash Community College, 522 N Old Carriage Road, Rocky Mount.

Board Room of the UNC Center for School Leadership Development
140 Friday Center Drive, Chapel Hill (**remote meeting locations in RED**)
More Information: <https://www.northcarolina.edu/bog/schedule.php>

Friday, Dec. 15

- 2:30 p.m. | The UNC Board of Governors, C.S.L.D. Building, Chapel Hill.

Friday, Jan. 26, 2018

- TBA | The UNC Board of Governors, C.S.L.D. Building, Chapel Hill.

Friday, March 23, 2018

- TBA | UNC Wilmington, Wilmington.

Friday, May 25, 2018

- TBA | The UNC Board of Governors, C.S.L.D. Building, Chapel Hill.

N.C. Utilities Commission Hearing Schedule

Dobbs Building
430 North Salisbury Street
Raleigh, North Carolina
More Information: <http://www.ncuc.commerce.state.nc.us/activities/activit.htm>

Monday, Dec. 18

- Staff Conference

Tuesday, Jan. 2

- Staff Conference

Other Meetings and Events of Interest

Items in **RED** are new listings.

Wednesday, Jan. 3

- 10 a.m. | The 16th Annual Economic Forecast Forum, Sheraton Imperial Hotel & Convention Center, 4700 Emperor Blvd, Durham.

Monday, March 19

- TBD | The N.C. Chamber hold annual meeting, Raleigh Marriott Crabtree Valley, 4500 Marriott Dr, Raleigh.

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